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ABSTRACT

As states and communities across the United States work to raise expectations for student learning, many are challenged by concerns and questions from increasingly vocal parents and teachers. This report summarizes the best advice for business coalitions and standards advocates on how to address the "testing backlash." It also features an analysis of current public opinion research on these issues. Advice for standards advocates focuses on the need to develop clear and reasonable standards and then communicate them clearly. Three business coalitions that promote student achievement are described. Opinion research reaffirms that parents and members of the public continue to support the push for higher standards. The public has common sense views about the usefulness and limitations of tests. Policy rarely keeps up with practice, and flaws in implementation are inevitable, but now is the time to deal with the warning signs of discontent and to establish good policy and communicate it clearly. (Contains 6 graphs, 1 table, and 22 references.) (SLD)

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Assessing and Addressing the "Testing Backlash"

Practical advice and current public opinion research
for business coalitions and standards advocates

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BRT THE BUSINESS ROUNDTABLE

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The Business Roundtable is an association of chief executive officers of leading U.S. corporations with a combined workforce of more than 10 million employees in the United States. The chief executives are committed to advocating public policies that foster vigorous economic growth, a dynamic global economy, and a well-trained and productive U.S. workforce essential for future competitiveness. Established in 1972, the BRT was founded in the belief that chief executives of major corporations should take an increased role in the continuing debates about public policy. Improving education performance in the United States is one of the chief executives' top public policy priorities.

Assessing and Addressing the "Testing Backlash"

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for business coalitions and standards advocates

Spring 2001

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Introduction

The idea of well-designed assessments that measure important standards is a bedrock principle of The Business Roundtable's (BRT) advocacy for better public schools. Tests provide important information that educators, parents and citizens can use to improve school performance and accountability. Recent proposals by the president and other federal leaders on testing and accountability underscore the importance of this agenda.

However, as states and communities across the country work to raise expectations for student learning, many are challenged by concerns and questions from increasingly vocal parents and teachers.

This "backlash" to higher standards and increased accountability is not a surprise. It is a natural reaction to change and to tougher consequences for poor student performance. Increasingly, students who have not mastered important academic standards will be denied diplomas or held back; schools that persistently fail are facing greater scrutiny and demands for improvement.

Voices of opposition to these policies not only emanate from parents and teachers, but in many places they also dominate the media. In recent months, front-page headlines from Arizona to Massachusetts played up this conflict and presented a lopsided view of the issue.

Business leaders have long been credible voices on the other side of this debate, making a compelling case for higher standards and improved accountability in schools. In this current environment, more than ever, the leadership and credibility of the business community is needed.

This report summarizes the best advice for business coalitions and standards advocates from around the country on how to address the "testing backlash." It also features an analysis of current public opinion research.

Policy rarely keeps up with practice. The key for leaders in every state is to give careful attention to getting the policy right and communicating it effectively.

What We Know About **Public Opinion**

Policymakers and education reformers who are dismayed by the possibility of a public backlash need not panic. The movement for higher standards and more rigorous testing is on the right course, according to recent public opinion research.

But there is indeed a backlash from some to the idea of using tests for accountability. It is not a majority of people, but it still must be acknowledged and handled.

There continues to be overwhelming support for standards-based reform — setting rigorous academic standards, measuring student progress against those standards, and holding students and educators accountable for meeting them. Studies by the BRT and Public Agenda demonstrate that parents and the general public alike support promotion and graduation tests to help determine whether students are ready to move on. These views prevail among all groups: suburban, urban, rural; white, black, Hispanic; wealthy, middle class, poor; Democrat, Republican, independent.

However, the public is not interested in simple solutions; people want to see reasonable and balanced testing and accountability policies that motivate students and schools to do better. They also worry about one-shot "high-stakes" tests. These findings mean states need commonsense implementation of education policies that people understand. The solution goes beyond improved public relations. It is about making sure the system works.

What The Business Roundtable **Found**

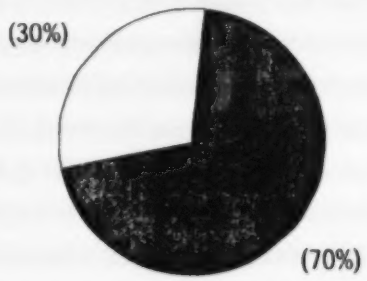
In an August 2000 national survey commissioned by the BRT, 65 percent of parents and 70 percent of the general public said that they support a policy of requiring students to "pass statewide tests before they can graduate from high school, even if they have passing grades in their classes." Support increases to 76 percent of parents and 81 percent of the general public if students "could take the tests several times."

Seventy-three percent of parents and 76 percent of the general public favor using statewide tests in English and math as criteria for promotion from fourth to fifth grade, even if pupils have passing grades in their classes. Support for such a requirement rises to 81 percent of parents and 87 percent of the general public when students who do not pass are given extra instruction in summer school and allowed to retake the test.

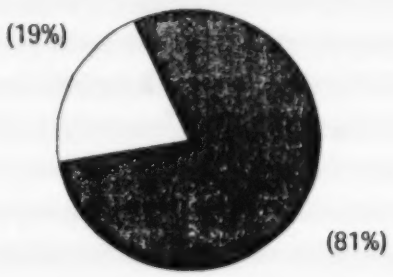
High academic standards also are favored strongly, with 81 percent of public school parents and 85 percent of the general public supporting the current push to raise academic standards as a "move in the right direction." And three in four parents (76 percent) said that their community's schools give the right amount of or not enough standardized tests in high school; 71 percent said the same for their elementary and middle school.

Graduation tests: Yes

Seven in 10 adults say students should have to "pass statewide tests before they can graduate from high school — even if they have passing grades."



Eight in 10 support statewide graduation tests if they know high school students "could take the test several times."

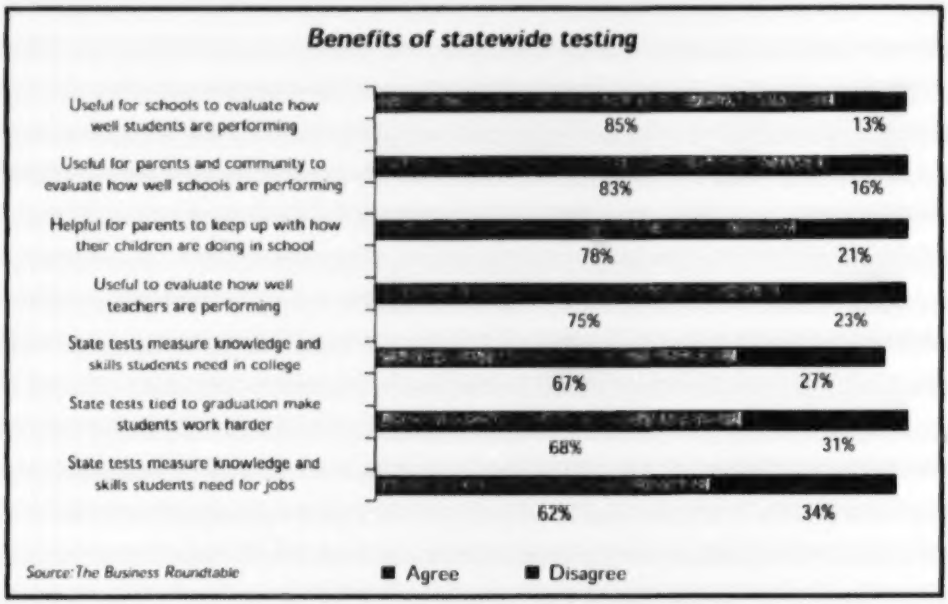


Source: The Business Roundtable

■ Should not have to pass test ■ Should have to pass test

The BRT survey also shows parents and the public identify multiple benefits of statewide testing:

- 85 percent of all respondents said that statewide test scores are useful for schools to evaluate how well students are performing;
- 83 percent of respondents agree such scores are very useful for parents and the community to evaluate how well their schools are performing; and
- 78 percent of respondents and 76 percent of parents agree scores help parents to keep up with how their own children are doing in school.



The BRT polling was conducted by the public opinion research firms of Belden Russonello & Stewart and Research/Strategy/Management, Inc.

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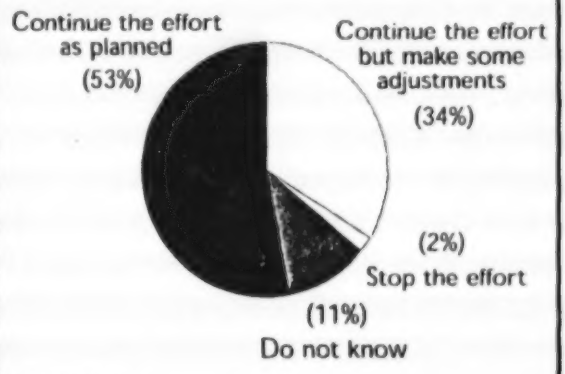
The BRT's poll findings were echoed in October 2000 by a survey from Public Agenda, a New York-based nonprofit organization that has conducted numerous public opinion surveys on education during the past decade.

Public Agenda's work considered parent opinions both nationally and in five school districts with well-publicized efforts to raise standards. Overall, it found only 2 percent of parents who know their school district is implementing higher standards want to stop and go back to the way things were before the standards were put in place. Fifty-three percent want to continue with the effort as planned, and one in three (34 percent) want to continue with some adjustments. Findings from additional interviews in the five cities with highly visible efforts — Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Los Angeles and New York — mirror these results.

When it comes to your school district's effort toward higher academic standards, the school district should:



Source: Public Agenda

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Notably, few parents reported that their child's own teachers or schools are overemphasizing standardized tests:

- only 9 percent said that teachers are putting too much academic pressure on their child;
- only 11 percent said that their child's school requires them to take too many standardized tests;
- only 12 percent said that questions on their child's standardized tests are so difficult that students cannot be expected to answer them; and
- only 18 percent said that teachers in their child's school "focus so much on preparing for standardized tests that real learning is neglected."

Percentage of parents who say:						
	United States	Boston	Chicago	Cleveland	Los Angeles	New York
Teachers are putting too much academic pressure on their child	9%	9%	11%	13%	6%	8%
Their child's school requires too many standardized tests	11%	18%	14%	18%	9%	9%
Questions on their child's standardized tests are so difficult that students cannot be expected to answer them	12%	22%	15%	20%	17%	11%
Teachers in their child's school focus so much on preparing for standardized tests that real learning is neglected	18%	24%	19%	27%	18%	21%

Source: Public Agenda

Like the BRT poll, Public Agenda found that parents feel standardized tests provide a variety of important functions. For example, 71 percent support testing during the elementary school years as a way to help identify struggling students early so they can get help.

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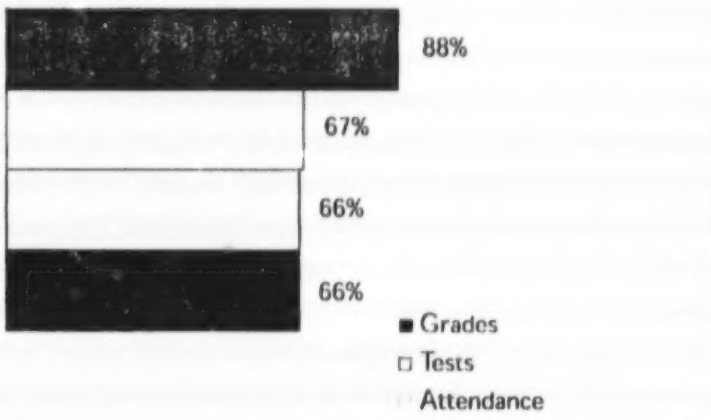
Despite these generally positive results, standards advocates should be aware of the following issues.

Relying only on tests: Both parents and the public agree with many of the arguments made by testing critics, according to the BRT research. Large numbers of those polled said they agree with these statements: Some children perform poorly on tests even if they know the material (80 percent), tests cannot measure many important skills children should learn (71 percent), and some teachers begin to teach what is on the tests and drop other important ideas and curriculum (64 percent). While they support the use of statewide standardized tests, the majority also recognize the value of other assessment measures when deciding if a student should be given a high school diploma — endorsing grades and teacher evaluations along with the test scores.

Lack of knowledge about testing practices: Public Agenda's research suggests that, while most parents seem to be comfortable with testing in their child's school, many others know little about the issue. Fifty-two percent of parents said that they simply do not know if the standardized tests their child takes ask fair questions, and 31 percent do not know if teachers are focusing too much time on test preparation. Testing critics may easily sway these parents.

Caution: Do not rely on tests alone for high school graduation

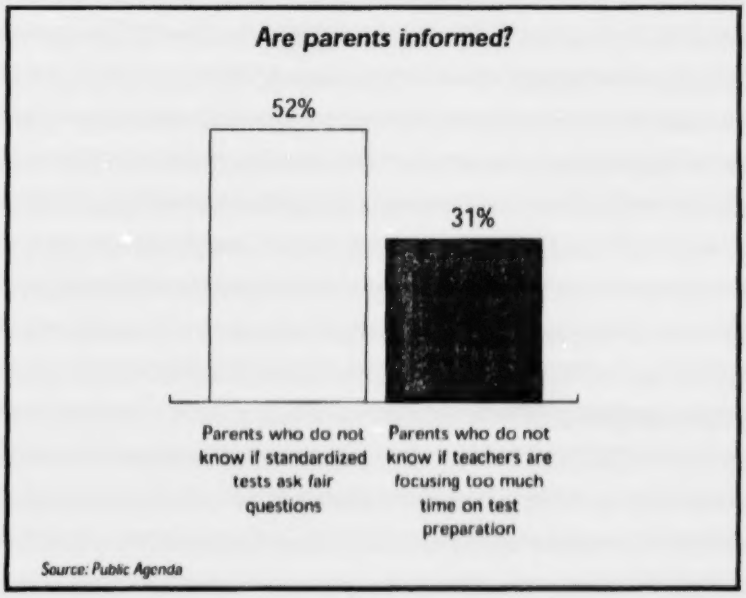
Parents and the general public also value other methods to measure achievement.



Source: *The Business Roundtable*

Lack of awareness about state standards: Despite all the fanfare and attention given to standards and tests in many states, not everyone is paying attention. Just over a majority of the public (56 percent) knows that their state has academic standards, the BRT found. More troubling, less than one in 10 said they are very familiar with those standards. While the survey found parents, not surprisingly, are more aware of school standards, only a few (15 percent) said that they were "very familiar" with them.

Different views from mothers and fathers: The BRT survey identified an important distinction among parents: While both mothers and fathers clearly support standards and testing, mothers are more likely to agree with some of the arguments against testing. In particular, they are more persuaded that testing can result in teaching to the test (67 percent) and can put too much pressure on elementary school children (65 percent). On the other hand, fathers are more comfortable placing emphasis on grades and tests for promotion decisions.


Are parents informed?
52%
31%
Parents who do not know if standardized tests ask fair questions
Parents who do not know if teachers are focusing too much time on test preparation
Source: Public Agenda

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Focusing on **Mothers and Teachers**

The BRT followed up its nationwide polling with 10 focus groups of parents and teachers in five cities (Alexandria, Va., Chicago, Ill., Jackson, Miss., Oakland, Calif., and White Plains, N.Y.) during December 2000 and January 2001. The focus groups were designed to elaborate on the poll findings and to find effective ways of communicating the role of state tests. They specifically focused on better understanding the concerns of mothers and teachers.

Higher expectations vs. higher standards

The groups uncovered the same strong support for the idea of higher expectations in schools that the polling did. But the research also found that mothers and teachers take issue with three important concepts:

- Many disagree with the notion that "all children can learn at high levels." Indeed, many even disagree that all can learn at higher levels than they are now. However, they do support the idea that many children have been denied access to a good education, and those who have been denied it would learn more if given better opportunities.

- There is a lack of urgency among many mothers and teachers to raise standards. They believe that schools already are performing well.

- Most of the teachers and mothers said it was important to raise expectations for students. But they are wary of creating a set of higher standards schools and students would be accountable for meeting. They worry that these standards would limit flexibility in schools, and they lack confidence that schools would be given the resources needed to meet these higher standards.

For most focus group participants, "standards" suggest "standardization" — which is both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, mothers and teachers see the advantages of coordinating curriculum from classroom to classroom and school to school. They understand why it is important to make learning transferable since families may move about. On the other hand, standards also suggest that teachers' creativity will be stifled, and teaching will become routine and static. Participants repeatedly said children are different from one another, and adults want to see opportunity for different children to acquire different knowledge and skills.

Tests for diagnosing, not punishing

Similarly, mothers and teachers believe that there are valuable uses for state or standardized testing in their schools, especially as diagnostic tools. These findings reiterated the poll results. Focus group participants said they think tests are most valuable because they can:

- inform teachers, parents and students about strengths and weaknesses, so that adjustments in teaching can be made;
- inform communities about how well their schools are doing, so people can make decisions about neighborhoods in which to live and schools in which to enroll their children; and
- allow districts and states to compare schools to identify systems' needs.

Most mothers and teachers also agree that state test results would be legitimate requirements for promotion and graduation from high school. However, focus group members were very clear that tests should *not* be used:

- as the sole measure for graduation or promotion;
- in ways that appear to be punitive for students, teachers or schools, rather than as a tool for improvement;
- as a way to label the performance of schools, because it leads to further erosion in enrollment and support for those schools; and
- to drive the entire agenda and curriculum for the school, district or state. ("Teaching to the test," for example, is a major complaint.)

Again, these findings reiterate the general poll findings: While there is support for testing and for using test scores to make decisions about student promotions, the public also sees downsides to testing and gives more support to policies that involve multiple measures of academic progress.

The good news: Standards and tests can work together for improvement

The conversation among focus group participants was decidedly different in locations with a long-standing, well-conceived commitment to standards-based reform. In these places — where testing is used along with added resources and assistance for teachers and students — mothers and teachers were more enthusiastic. They said teaching had become more focused and was more coordinated in helpful ways.

Advice for Standards **Advocates**

It is important to realize that your state may — now or in the future — face a backlash to its school improvement strategies. Remember: Research results provide reassurance that there continues to be widespread support for standards, testing and accountability systems; do not back down on efforts to develop and implement these school improvement policies.

But, even if only two in 10 people raise serious concerns about the program, that level of opposition can be significant. This is not an election where a simple majority wins. Rather, you need to build the depth of consensus that will provide public support for the long term. Indeed, as your state and community come closer to tying actual rewards and consequences to your standards and testing efforts, you can expect to see increased opposition.

States facing a backlash (or hoping to avoid it) should do two things: Get the policy right and do a better job of communicating with teachers and parents — the stakeholders who have the most credibility.

Recognizing the opposition

Based on the experience of some states, anticipate organized opposition to testing and consequences. Expect some educators and researchers who dislike the very principles of educational accountability and uniform standards to be part of this opposition.

Although the BRT and Public Agenda research did not find opposition to testing as far-reaching or deep as some recent media reports suggest, supporters frequently are less vocal than opponents. And they are rarely as well organized — with Web sites, e-mail listservs and speakers bureaus to disseminate information opposing state tests. (See "Resources" at the end of this report for more information.)

Battling for the "undecideds"

You also are likely to hear from parents, teachers and citizens who have legitimate questions and concerns — the equivalent of undecided voters. Some simply will be confused; others will be openly skeptical. This is understandable. Standards advocates are asking communities to accept a novel premise for America: Virtually all children can learn at much higher levels than have been expected of previous generations.

Take these concerns seriously. Recognize that public support can be weakened significantly by policies and practices that do not demonstrably show students having a reasonable chance to meet the higher standards.

Teachers are especially credible and influential voices (see findings on page 20) — but they also are more likely to be concerned about how tests are causing them to change instruction. Adjust state policies, if necessary. Improve communications. Otherwise, you run the risk of these "undecideds" siding with the organized opposition.

Set standards that are appropriate and broadly supported

Make sure standards are clear, right, reasonable and matched to the curriculum. Listen to parents and teachers — through focus groups or community meetings — to make sure they understand that this is so; if you sense a disconnect, adapt and clarify. Do the same with your state's tests: Make sure they actually measure your state's standards.

Organizations like Achieve, Inc. have developed expertise in reviewing state standards and tests; they can help you make revisions to improve quality. The Achieve Web site — www.achieve.org — provides ideas about what high-quality standards and tests look like.

At the same time, recognize that, in many ways, the material in these standards is more ambitious than what many teachers have taught and many students have learned. There are bound to be complaints, and the transition to helping many more students meet challenging expectations inevitably will be rocky. Be thoughtful about separating complaints that the standards are simply too hard from legitimate concerns from teachers about test alignment and lack of instructional support.

In other words, do not confuse support for the cornerstone *principles* of school improvement efforts (where you have the backing of public opinion) with issues of the *implementation* of these policies (where parents and teachers share some misgivings).

Benchmarking against the best

Through its benchmarking service, Achieve, Inc. provides interested states with in-depth advice about the strengths and weaknesses of their standards and how well their companion state assessments do their jobs. As part of this work, Achieve, Inc. consulted with master teachers, curriculum specialists and researchers to identify the standards it considers the best in the world. They include:

English/Language Arts	Early Literacy	Mathematics
California	North Carolina	Arizona
Massachusetts	Texas	Japan
	New Standards	

Achieve is a nonprofit organization of CEOs and governors founded after the 1996 National Education Summit. More information is available at www.achieve.org.

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Give students their best shot — and many shots — to show they have met the standards

According to a recent review by the National Governors Association, not a single state uses a test that students have only one chance to pass in order to graduate. But that fact often is obscured by testing opponents. Be proactive in communicating broadly about the facts of your state's testing policies: Make sure that people understand that students will have more than one chance to pass.

Additionally, you may want to consider a "tests-plus" policy to make promotion and graduation decisions. The public opinion research suggests that, in addition to state tests, state policymakers should consider other measures of student performance, such as course grades and teacher evaluations. Perhaps create an alternative appeals process for students who do not pass the tests but can show they nevertheless have mastered the material.

Indiana promotes students meeting standards — not passing a test

In Indiana, state officials took deliberate steps to avoid a testing backlash before it even happened. The class of 2000 was the first set of high school students required to pass the state's new 10th-grade test, and educators wanted to make sure the public debate was about kids meeting high standards and not about whether they could pass a test.

Indiana's unique approach creates three opportunities for students to show they have met rigorous high school standards:

- First, all students take the 10th-grade tests in English/language arts and mathematics, and they have five chances between then and their senior year to get a passing grade in each section. Students who struggle receive extra assistance.
- If students cannot pass the test, then, alternatively, they can complete — with no less than a "C" in each course — all 40 credits of Indiana's state-approved college-prep coursework in English/language arts, mathematics, science and social studies.
- As a third option, Indiana created a narrow waiver process — including attendance, grades and other clear evidence presented by a student's teachers — that shows that a student can meet the standards.

The result: Only 54 percent of Indiana's class of 2000 passed the new 10th-grade math and verbal tests the first time around. But after a great deal of assistance and remedial work, the final graduation rate last June was 89.5 percent — an all-time high for the state.

Contact Cheryl Orr at (317) 464-4400 ext. 19, or visit www.doe.state.in.us for more information.

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Make sure assistance, such as after-school tutoring and summer school, is provided immediately to students who do not succeed the first time. The public will want to see that these policies are not setting kids up for failure. Show that the state and schools are doing all they can to give students what they need to achieve. Public Agenda found that 81 percent of parents approve of having policies that require summer school for students who cannot meet the standards.

Be willing to adjust policy

Good policy does not always work in practice, and state leaders should be open to the idea of making "midcourse" corrections as they learn more about the challenges schools face in meeting higher standards. Making adjustments does not mean backing down; rather it means listening to reasonable requests and suggestions — for more resources, more flexibility, more time — that can make the state's reform effort more successful in the longrun. One business leader in Massachusetts — a state that recently has seen its teachers' association organize an aggressive anti-testing effort — observes, "Pacing is everything." Changes can be implemented only so quickly by teachers in the classroom, and rushing risks errors that can undermine the overall effort.

Virginia makes midcourse corrections to phase in higher standards

Virginia set a rigorous goal for its schools: To receive full accreditation from the state beginning in 2007, a public school must have 70 percent of its students meet expectations on most of the new Standards of Learning (SOL) exams. In the first year of testing, however, just over 6 percent of schools reached this threshold. While the number of schools meeting this goal is growing dramatically — this year, 22 percent of schools met the standard — state officials stepped in with midcourse corrections to respond to concerns that these improvement goals were too ambitious.

First, state officials created two new categories to characterize school progress. Schools that are "Provisionally Accredited/Meets State Standards" do not meet the 2007 standard but are meeting annual benchmarks toward this standard and will not lose accreditation. The other new category, "Accredited With Warning," includes schools with serious academic problems and the lowest student pass rates on the state tests. Virginia leaders are targeting their improvement efforts at these schools.

In addition to these changes for schools, policymakers made changes for students. For the next few years, beginning with the class of 2004, students must pass only six of the 12 high school SOL tests to graduate. Also, under new state rules, students will be able to substitute scores from equally rigorous high school tests, such as Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate exams, for the state tests.

Visit www.pen.k12.va.us for more information.

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Help teachers develop skills and knowledge for success

Teachers are rightly frustrated when they are given the challenging task of raising student performance without additional guidance or assistance. More important, helping students meet higher academic expectations will happen only if teachers have strong subject-area teaching skills. Find out what sort of support teachers need, such as sample lessons, classroom assessments, or time to plan with and learn from colleagues. Identify and share promising practices that are leading to improvement in other schools.

Encourage data for decisionmaking

Ensure educators, parents and students receive testing results in a timely fashion so they can act on the information and make changes. Help them learn how to access this data, how to analyze it and how to act on it. (Some of the best Web sites providing school and student performance information are described below.)

Data can drive continuous improvement

The following Web-based information systems provide important tools for measuring and comparing school performance and helping educators and the public celebrate academic strengths and address weaknesses.

- **FEISTIER (Finance Excellence Indicator System of Texas — Information About Educational Resources)** is a project of the Texas Business and Education Coalition and the Texas Association of School Business Officials, which provides access to a series of financial data for Texas' 1,042 school districts. Contact John Stevens at (512) 480-8232, or visit www.tbec.org.
- **The Illinois School Improvement Web site** is designed to help local educators and others use data to answer: How are we doing? Where do we need to be? How will we get there? Where can we find resources to help? Contact Richard Laine at (312) 236-7271, or visit http://ilsi.isbe.net.
- **Just for the Kids** uses demographic and school performance statistics, dating back to 1990, to draw an easy-to-understand picture of the strengths, weaknesses, progress and potential for improvement of each Texas school. In addition, the organization now is working with other states to implement similar systems. Call (512) 320-4150, or visit www.just4kids.org.
- **The Maryland School Improvement Web site** offers school-by-school comparisons of testing results, combined with a checklist of action steps and suggested best practices. Maryland officials report the site receives considerable traffic and many plaudits from educators. Contact Lani Hall Seikaly at lani@mdk12.org, or visit www.mdk12.org.
- **Standard & Poor's School Evaluation Services** offer a "return on resources" synthesis of financial and academic performance factors; analysis of strengths, challenges and risks; and comparisons with state, geographic and socioeconomic peers. Contact William Cox at (212) 438-7984, or visit www.standardandpoors.com.

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Making sure state testing and accountability policies are well conceived, balanced and fair is only part of the challenge. Advocates also need to do a better job explaining the benefits of standards and testing.

Parents and others must understand why this fundamental change in behavior and culture is worth the effort and how it is leading to positive changes for students and schools. Advocacy becomes more difficult as tests grow in complexity and measure higher-level skills, such as advanced algebra and geometry, where the public is less convinced of the importance.

Most state or local education departments lack the communications capacity to mount a sustained, effective communications effort. The business community can provide much-needed help. (For three examples, read about the activities of business coalitions in Maryland, Massachusetts and Washington on pages 22–24.)

Target key audiences

Improve communications, especially with those who are seen by parents and the general public as the most credible sources of information about standards and tests: teachers, other parents and college admissions officials.

Do not assume, however, that simply putting "a better spin" on your state's school improvement program will be sufficient to change public opinion. Parents and the general public — while prepared to back commonsense policies and programs — are raising concerns about programs that some perceive as too punitive, too rigid and too focused on measuring rather than improving student achievement.

Use tests to communicate

Statewide tests often are very effective communications tools; they allow teachers, parents and citizens to see for themselves what students are expected to know and be able to do. Business coalitions in Delaware, Ohio, Washington and other states have found success — and favorable press coverage — by sponsoring "take-the-test" days that give the public formal opportunities to try out test questions. In Texas, state leaders decided to go one step further and publicly release all test items each year.

If you are concerned that your state's test might not withstand such public scrutiny, then you must improve the test.

Focus on student achievement and improvement

At the same time, keep the overall focus on student learning, not testing. Center the conversation on the overarching purpose of your reforms — ensuring that more children, especially those who traditionally have been served poorly, receive the kind of high-quality education they need to succeed in the 21st century.

Remind people why states and communities are raising standards in the first place: Large majorities of employers, college leaders, education experts and citizens say too many American students are failing to leave high school with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in college, at work and in their communities.

In addition, find examples — lots of them — of schools that are using the standards and tests to make dramatic improvements and help more students learn. Contrast the typical media reports and op-ed articles about stressed-out kids, frustrated teachers and inflexible classrooms with accounts of the many schools that are finding new standards an invigorating way to improve teaching quality and help students succeed.

Keep in mind that testing advocates already are communicating their messages proactively. In many states, they have begun organizing grassroots efforts that are informed by Web sites and speakers bureaus.

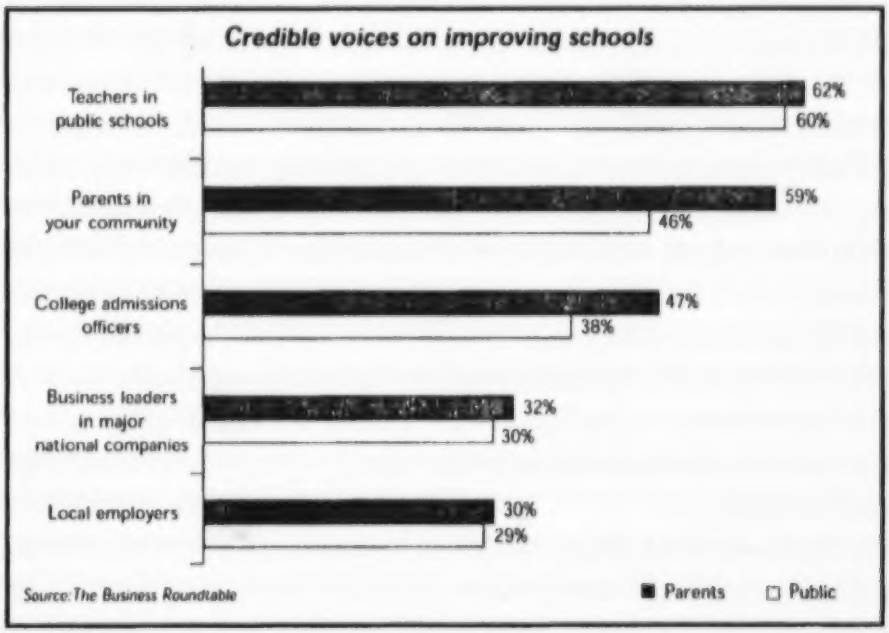
Help teachers understand

Opinion research appears to suggest that many teachers have the following concerns about the push for higher standards in classrooms:

- State tests measuring the standards unnecessarily narrow the curriculum, forcing teachers to "teach to the test" and discouraging creativity.
- Because of their family background or lack of motivation, not all students will be able to meet high standards, regardless of what teachers do.
- The demands of higher standards are creating pressure and stress on teachers; some feel they do not have the skills, resources and assistance they need to be successful in helping students meet the standards.

Make a more concerted effort to reach out to classroom teachers. Explain these changes, tell them that many teachers think there are benefits, and show them how other schools are using standards and tests to improve student learning.

If your state has adopted sound testing practices that address the policy issues described above, then make sure teachers have this information.



Make your messages resonate

Public opinion research contains valuable ideas about what messages on education and standards make the most sense to the public.

Stress that the effort is about better schools and higher levels of learning — not standards, tests, accountability or education reform. Parents and educators want to know that better schools are needed because we have to be fair to all students, not because schools are failing.

Your communications efforts should emphasize:

- the importance of raising expectations for all students.
- the fairness that comes from higher expectations (too many students are not getting the education they deserve);
- the ability of testing to diagnose strengths and weaknesses of students (helping them learn and teachers teach); and
- the value of test scores for comparing schools and identifying necessary improvements — and as part of the decision to promote or graduate students.

And remember:

- Stress that students have the opportunity to retake new high school graduation tests — usually many times.
- Focus on what you are doing to help schools succeed: more training and development to give teachers new skills coupled with extra help for struggling students.

Three Business Coalitions
Promote Student Achievement

State business coalitions in Maryland, Massachusetts and Washington are engaged in ongoing, proactive efforts to help parents and educators understand school improvement initiatives.

Maryland: Achievement counts

The Maryland Business Roundtable for Education (MBRT) builds support and awareness for higher standards through its "Achievement Counts" campaign on school records. The campaign presents parents and students with a real-world reason for why high standards matter: Hundreds of employers have been recruited by the BRT to begin reviewing high school transcripts as part of the hiring process. The campaign sends a clear message that hard work and high standards in school matter.

MBRT began this effort by conducting focus groups with ninth-grade students to determine effective messages and messengers. With advice from students that younger "20-something" employees — rather than older managers and vice presidents — would be most effective and credible, MBRT recruited and trained 400 young businesspeople to speak with ninth graders in eight of Maryland's largest school districts. In the first two years of the program, speakers made 1,000 presentations to 25,000 students at 54 high schools.

In addition, a partnership with a radio station uses the persuasive power of a popular disc jockey to make it cool to achieve in school, offering specially written commercials, promotions, a Web site, and incentives including free CDs and concert tickets. More than 3,000 students have pledged to the disc jockey that they will work harder for better grades and attendance.

All of these activities send an important message to Maryland citizens: What students learn in school has a clear bearing on future success.

Visit www.mbrt.org for more information.

Massachusetts: A campaign for higher standards

As testing critics have become more vocal, Mass Insight Education — a coalition of major Massachusetts employers and school districts — makes sure standards advocates across the state are well armed with information. Its "Campaign for Higher Standards" uses regular e-mail broadcasts to educators, opinion leaders and parent leaders to provide timely, informative facts about the state of standards.

"This isn't about feel-good educational excellence; it's a political fight," according to one of Mass Insight's leaders. "In a political fight, the 'no' side has an advantage. It's easier to attack what's wrong than to explain what's right." Mass Insight thinks it is essential for advocates to be well armed with information that refutes the anti-testing arguments.

In particular, Mass Insight uses findings from public opinion research as a powerful tool for communication. Despite grumbling from some policymakers and parent advocates about Massachusetts' impending graduation exam, Mass Insight's polling documents show — just as the BRT's polling did — that deep support exists for the English and math exams. Support is strongest when parents and the public learn that students will have four chances to pass the exams and those who are failing will receive extra help.

Mass Insight aggressively disseminates these findings through both its e-mail network and the media. In addition, these research findings provide grist for both op-ed articles and newspaper editorials. Even in news articles featuring the arguments of testing critics, Mass Insight's polling becomes a source of information for "on the other hand."

Finally, Mass Insight has supported other business groups and standards supporters in developing a new radio advertising campaign in Massachusetts. The campaign is designed to counter vocal opposition to the state's exam from the Massachusetts Teachers Association and some school board members.

Contact Mass Insight Education at (617) 722-4160, or visit www.massinsight.com for more information.

Washington: Making standards work

Partnership for Learning, a coalition of Washington state businesses advocating for better schools, showcases success stories with opinion leaders, parents and educators. The goal is to show that schools can use the new standards and tests to help students succeed.

The centerpiece of the Partnership's work is an annual study of rapidly improving schools — those making the greatest progress in helping students meet new standards, especially with disadvantaged student populations. An independent researcher performs the study, and the results show the steps schools take to help their students meet the standards. The research report helps communicate the positive ways

many schools are using the new standards and tests to improve student learning. The report is disseminated broadly in the media and directly to elected officials, school leaders, parents, activists and community leaders.

This year, the Partnership also prepared a companion video that, along with a discussion guide, was sent to all PTA chapters and every school principal. The video was designed carefully to address some of the most pressing concerns from teachers about the state standards and tests. Using the voices of principals and teachers at schools that have helped disadvantaged students improve test scores, the video contradicts the arguments that some kids cannot meet higher standards and that standards force teachers to be less creative or standardize their teaching.

For more information, contact Partnership for Learning at (206) 625-9655, or visit www.partnership-wa.org. A copy of the research report, *Making Standards Work*, is available online.

An undertapped resource: Informing company employees

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BRT member companies employ over 10 million people who are voters and, in many cases, parents. This audience is an obvious place to begin a communications effort. Even as they persuade policymakers of the wisdom of higher standards for all kids, business leaders also can inform their own employees about why these strategies are so important.

State Farm Insurance provides an example of the outreach in which employers can engage easily. State Farm regularly includes articles about education reform — explaining standards and accountability — in companywide newsletters. It also provides information for its managers and agents about the company's positions on education issues.

New materials produced by the BRT — in partnership with state coalitions in Kentucky, Maryland and Washington — provide an easy way to launch similar efforts in other companies. These ready-to-use materials include issue briefs, newsletter articles and e-mail messages. The materials are organized around nine topics, including testing, good teaching and asking for high school transcripts.

Many of these materials can be accessed from the BRT Web site and then tailored for use in individual states or companies. Visit www.brt.org for more information.

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Conclusion: A Collision Between **Rhetoric and Reality**

Over the past decade, business leaders made a unique commitment to shepherd efforts to raise academic standards in the nation's schools. As these proposals finally are becoming a reality, we need business leadership and advocacy more than ever.

The rhetoric of education reform — higher expectations for all students — is colliding with the reality of schools and students that struggle to succeed. In the best cases, education policies, even if coherent at the state system level, often are implemented without sufficient communication with teachers, parents or students. In the worst cases, states still need to design the building blocks of school reform: standards that are truly clear and rigorous, tests that are aligned with the standards, and support programs that help students and teachers meet these higher expectations.

Opinion research reaffirms that parents and members of the public continue to support the push for higher standards. The public has commonsense views about both the usefulness and limitations of tests.

Policy rarely keeps up with practice, and flaws in implementation are inevitable. Now is the time to deal appropriately with the warning signs of discontent, to focus on getting the policy right, and to communicate more broadly about how to make the system work. Now is also the time to continue insisting on consequences for performance. However, it is *not* the time to avoid the painful truths about school performance that test results make apparent.

Resolving these issues requires leadership, endurance and commitment — attributes the business community will continue to bring to public advocacy for better schools.

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Resources

The Business Roundtable (www.brt.org):

- *Making Standards Work: Public Attitudes About Standards and Testing* (key findings from the BRT's recent opinion research)
- *What Parents, Students and Teachers Think About Standards, Tests, Accountability ... and More* (a compilation of public opinion data on these issues from the past three years)
- *Building Support for Tests That Count: A Business Leader's Guide* (advice for business leaders about promoting sound and useful tests to measure standards)
- Employee communications materials (ready-to-use newsletter articles and other materials for companies)

Achieve (www.achieve.org):

- Policy Brief #1 — *Testing: Setting the Record Straight* (explains the role tests play in improving student achievement)
- Policy Brief #2 — *High Standards: Giving All Students a Fair Shot* (reviews policies that give students preparation they need to meet higher standards)
- "Gaining Ground" article from *Education Week's Quality Counts 2001* (provides advice on improving standards and assessments, based on Achieve's "benchmarking" work in states)

Committee for Economic Development (www.ced.org):

- *Measuring What Matters* (report on testing and accountability and improving student learning)

Education Excellence Partnership (www.edex.org):

- *On the Same Page: Building Local Support for Higher Standards and Better Schools* (ideas for principals to communicate with parents and educators about school improvement efforts)
- *Strengthening Your Child's Academic Future* (a brochure explaining standards and testing to parents)

Public Agenda (www.publicagenda.org):

- Education section, including "Understanding the Issues" (online review of facts and policy alternatives in effort to raise academic

standards) and "Public Opinion" (online compilation of key polling and focus group findings)

- "Survey Finds Little Sign of Backlash Against Academic Standards or Standardized Tests" (press release and complete survey questionnaire)
- Reality Check 2001 (national public opinion poll on school reform issues)
- *Standards and Accountability: Where the Public Stands* (opinion research from Public Agenda and others on academic standards)

Also look for more information — both pro and con — on these Web sites:

- www.alfiekohn.org — Alfie Kohn, a one-man campaign against state standards and testing, is working to organize critics in states around the country.
- www.c-b-e.org — The Council for Basic Education advocates for a strong school curriculum in English, history, geography, government, mathematics, sciences, foreign languages and the arts for all children.
- www.edexcellence.net — The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation supports research, publications and action projects on national education issues, including standards and accountability.
- www.edtrust.org — The Education Trust works for higher standards and academic achievement for all students at all levels.
- www.fairtest.org — The National Center for Fair and Open Testing is the leading national critic against standardized testing; its Web site cites the arguments testing critics use in states nationwide.
- www.nga.org — The National Governors Association recently completed a review of state graduation exams, which now shows not a single state expects students to pass on only one try.
- www.standardswork.org — StandardsWork is a nonprofit organization that consults with communities and schools on how to raise academic standards successfully.

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